

# Buddhism and Vegetarianism



Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa



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# Buddhism and Vegetarianism

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To the readers

This article was formerly prepared as a dissertation paper to be submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master in Reserach to the University of Kelaniya in Srilanka. Highlighted here is the Buddhist Perspective on Vegetarianism with reference to Pāli Texts.

Nowadays, all over the world, there appear many people who follow the practice of Vegetaranism yet found out to hold different views. Some become vegetarian an account of their health situations whereas for most people, such practice is based on their religious belief.

In this context, there may be different ideas how they follow this practice. How people make a decision of comsuming food as regards the life of the animals? Basically, vegetarians can be classified into different categories. As a vegetarian, some consume egg but not milk whereas some avoid eating egg but drink milk. Still some people abstain from partaking any by-products of animals such as milk, egg, etc. but love to use materials made of animal skin, etc. In case of some, they refrain

## Ashin Nandamālābhivamsa

from either consuming or using any products of animals.

According to Theravada Buddhism, its adherents are neither encouraged nor insisted to be a vegetarian. Since not a compulsory practice, neither vegetarians are praised nor are non-vegetarians to be blamed. The purpose of consuming food in Buddhism is to sustain one's life and body while partaking any kind of food which should be blameless and to remove craving on food.

As Buddhism throws light on Majjhimapaṭipadā (Middle Way) as its one and only practice to attain final liberation, it wisely advises its adherents to avoid extremes (anta).

The Omniscient Buddha expounded His followers to avoid any food which is unwholesome; the food which is wholesome but blameworthy; to refrain from ordering in killing animals as he accumulates demerit and finally to remove wrong views that is blameworthy to be a non-vegetarian, etc.

This article attempts to convey the original essence of Buddha's teachings as regards Vegetarianism. May the readers realize the true perspective of being a good Vegetarian.

## BUDDHISM AND VEGETARIANISM

Buddhism neither condemns nor praises the practice of vegetarianism. It never says practising vegetarianism is right or wrong. It only says that you should have moderation in food, vegetable or meat (bhojane mattaññutā).

Food is necessary for all living beings to live long. Without food, beings are unable to survive. The Buddha says, “all beings sustain through nutriment or cause (sabbe sattā āhāratthitikā)”. To eat is to live long.

Before the emergence of Buddhism there were some Brahmanas and recluses who believed in purity of mental defilements through the practice of austerity in food. They ate only rice or vegetables, very small in quantity. They would stay without food very often. They believed that through this way, which was a sort of self-mortification, purification could be achieved.



The Buddha says: “O Sāriputta, there are some Samaṇas and Brahmanas who hold such an assertion and view of purity through nutriment (Āhārena suddhi). They say thus: “We live on mugga bean(green gram). We live on sesame. We live on rice”. (Mahāsīhanāda Sutta:MN). The Buddha rejects the concept of purification through nutriment.

Some religious thinkers assumed vegetarianism as a sort of asceticism. They strictly practise vegetarianism, and abstain from eating fish and meat throughout all their lives. The Buddha says they are the persons who torture themselves and practise self-tortured actions. (attantapo, attaparitāpanā nuyogaṃ anuyutto)

The Buddha does not assume vegetarianism as a morality. The practice of vegetarianism is not even a part of morality (sīla) which is a factor of the Eightfold Noble Path.

The Buddha encourages His disciples to

practice Dhūtaṅgas which are not compulsory but optional. Dhūtaṅga literally means a factor of destruction of mental impurities. The practice of vegetarianism is not a sort of Dhūtaṅgas. It is not an important factor for cessation of suffering as well. Therefore the Buddha did not exhort His disciples to practise vegetarianism. But He advised them to have moderation in eating.

During the Buddha's life time the foods people ate can be traced through Pāḷi Canons. There were five kinds of foods mentioned in Pācittiya Pāḷi of Vinaya Piṭaka.

“Five kinds of food ( Pañca bhojanāni) are rice (odana), baked rice powder (sattu), boiled flour (kummasa), fish (maccha) and meat (maṃsa).”

These five kinds of food were commonly used by the people as their daily food and also offered them to monks during the time of the Buddha.

In the 39th rule of the Pācittiya, nine kinds of

delicious food are mentioned thus: there are delicious foods, namely, foods mixed with ghee or butter(sappi), fresh butter (navanītaṃ), oil (telam), honey (madhu), molasses (phāṇitaṃ), fish (maccho), meat (maṃsaṃ), milk (khīraṃ) and curd (dadhi).

These nine kinds of foods could be found in the rich family's dining room and they offered these to monks. Buddhist monks were allowed to accept them if lay people offered according to their wish, but they were guilty if they asked lay people for them without having special reason, that is during illness. In a poor family's kitchen broken rice together with sour gruel (kanajakam balanga dutiyam) can be found. This food may be the poorest food during the Buddha's lifetime.

This food was generally given to servants and workers in the house of rich people. King Sodhodana, the father of the Buddha, was rich and generous. He gave rice mixed with meat (sālī maṃsodana) to his servants and

workers as their daily food.

The Buddha says: “ O monks, in the other people house broken rice together with sour gruel is given to servants and workers. However in my father’s house rice mixed with meat is given to them (Sukhumala Sutta: AN)”.

Therefore, we have to know that fish and meat were commonly used by the people during the lifetime of the Buddha. The Buddha and His followers had to depend upon the almsgiving. The Buddha Himself ate meat and allowed His disciples to do so if the meat was not specially for them at the source.

We can find some kinds of meat in the Buddha’s bowl. We have some evidences to prove it through Pāḷi Canons.

“On one occasion a lay disciple of the Buddha, Ugga by name, who lived in Vesālī, offered alms-giving to the Buddha and the Saṅgha in his house. Rice and curry and various esculents (khadaīya) were specially arranged.

Ugga said: "Lord, this pork curry cook with jujube fruit is so delicious. Do accept it with compassion for me!" The Buddha accept it (Manāpadāyī sutta of Aṅguttara nikāya).

On one occasion, a group of robbers killed a cow for meat in the forest of blinds (Andhavana) near Jetavana. In the forest an Arahant Bhikkhunī, Uppalavaṇṇa by name, stayed under a tree experienceing the bliss of Phala Samāpatti. The leader of the robber saw her sitting under a tree and commanded his followers to go by the other way. He hung a package of beef out on a branch of a tree dedicating it to this Bhikkhunī and went away after saying himself that he offered it to any person who found it. Theri Uppalavaṇṇa took the package of beef and offered it to the Buddha.(Nisaggiypācittiya Pāḷi of VinayaPiṭaka).

On one occasion the Buddha was on His way to Kusināra on His last day. Cunda, the goldsmith of Pāvā,

offered the Buddha the last meal including Sukaramaddava. Sukaramaddava means the flesh of a pig aged one year on sale, not so young, not so old. This kind of pork is soft and rich in nutritive essence. Although this term Sukaramaddava, was given several interpretations, the only meaning above mentioned was accepted by Ven. Buddhaghosa. (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta of Dīgha nikāya).

Ven. Buddhaghosa mentioned other teacher's interpretation of Sukaramaddava in his book. Some teachers said that Sukaramaddava is a drink of rice, milk, or milky rice pudding. The other said that it is a sort of tonic. (The Commentary on Mahāparinibbāna sutta). Some scholars today who believe in vegetarianism say Sukaramaddava is a sort of mushroom.

We found the meat in the bowl of the Buddha and His followers, but the Buddha did not grant ten kinds of meat to be eaten.

There are ten kinds of meat, namely human flesh (manussa-mam̐sa), elephant flesh (hatthi-mam̐sa), horse flesh (assa-mam̐sa), dog flesh (sunakha-mam̐sa), snake flesh (ahi-mam̐sa), lion flesh (siha-mam̐sa), tiger flesh (byagga-mam̐sa), leopard flesh (dīpamam̐sa), bear flesh (accha-mam̐sa) and hyena or wolf flesh (taracha-mam̐sa). (Mahāvāsga Pāḷi of Vinaya Piṭaka).

Buddhist monks must abstain from taking these ten kinds of meat on account of the special reasons. The reasons are given in brief in the Commentary on Vinaya (samanta pāsādika) thus: Human flesh should not be eaten because of being one own species. Elephant flesh and horse should not be eaten being the property of a king. Dog flesh and snake flesh should not be eaten being disgusting. Lion flesh, tiger flesh, etc., should not be eaten being harmful.

Regarding the ten kinds of meat, interesting stories are mentioned in the Mahāvagga Pāḷi of Vivaya

piṭaka.

### **Human flesh**

On one occasion the Buddha stayed at Isipatana near Vārāṇasī. A pious Buddhist lay woman, Suppiya by name, promised a sick monk to offer a kind of meat soup. Unfortunately it was impossible to cook meat soup as that day was not kill-day (māghata samaya). Any flesh on sale could not be bought in the market.

Then Suppiya thought herself, “I have promised a sick monk to offer a kind of meat soup. But I cannot get any meat in the market today. If I do not send any meat soup, that monk may die or his disease may become worse. In any way, I must offer the meat soup to the monk”.

After that, she entered her bedroom and cut a piece of flesh out from her thigh with a knife. Her husband exclaimed, “How wonderful! What great confidence she has! there will not be any other thing



which she cannot give, if she is able to offer even her own flesh.”

The next day the Buddha went to her home at the invitation of her husband. The Buddha inquired where Suppiya was. After having reported of that event, the Buddha called her to His presence. She was carried immediately. As soon as she saw the Buddha, her wound in the thigh was cured and as good as before, this caused her much surprise and happiness, and she paid homage to the Buddha in great reverence.

The sick monk was blamed owing to taking to human-flesh soup without making an inquiry. Regarding this event the Buddha admonished His disciples and promulgated a Vinaya rule.

“O monks, there are some lay devotees who have great confidence. They dare to offer even their own flesh. O monks, human flesh should not be eaten . A monk who eats human flesh must be guilty of Thullaccaya (great

offence).

Then the Buddha advised His disciples not to eat any meat without making inquiry beforehand.

### **Elephant flesh and horse flesh**

Once upon a time a kingdom suffered from famine. The king's elephants and horse died and people ate their meat. They offered those meat to the monks as an alms-giving and monks also ate it. Some people condemned the monks for taking the meat of elephant and horse. They said elephants and horses were the property of the king. If the king knew that monks ate the meat, he would be displeased with monks. The Buddha say: “,O monks, elephant flesh ad horse flesh should not be eaten. Any monk who eats it must be guilty of dukkaṭa (the offence of wrong-action)”.

### **Dog Flesh**

While the condition of famine arose some people ate dog flesh and offered monks in alms-giving. Some

people condemned monks for taking that meat. They said that dog flesh was disgusting. The Buddha says, "O monks, dog flesh should not be eaten. Any monk who eat it must be guilty of Dukkata".

### **Snake Flesh**

On one occasion of famine some people ate snake flesh and offered monks. Some people condemned monks as before. The Buddha says: "O monks, snake flesh should not be eaten. Any monk who eats it must be guilty of Dukkata".

### **Lion Flesh, etc**

During the time of famine some people ate the flesh of lion, tiger, leopard, bear and offered it to the monks.

After taking the meat, the monk went to forest to practise meditation. On account of the smell of the meat they ate., lion, tiger, etc, chased the monks. That event was reported to the Buddha and the Buddha says: "O

monks lion flesh, etc; should not be eaten. Any monk who eats it must be guilty of Dukkaṭa.”

Although the Buddha granted His followers all kinds of meat except the ten sorts of meat, he imposed three restrictions regarding meat. If any monk either saw or heard or even suspected that an animal had been killed specially for him, then the monk should not be accepted. The Buddha together with his followers did not abstain from meat. So, He was condemned by the other religious thinkers very often.

Once upon a time a chief commander of Vajji, Siha by name was converted to Buddhism. He invited the Buddha and His disciples and offered an alms-giving. He prepared rice and curry including meat which was bought from market. Jainist monks heard that Sīha offered the Buddha rice with meat. They condemned both the Buddha and Sīha. They falsely accused: Sīha, the Chief Commander, has killed a large animal to offer meat to

Samaṇa Gotama Meat and knowing truly that event samaṇa Gotama has taken the meat 1. (Sīha-Sīhasenāpati sutta of Anguttara nikāya).

According to Jainism eating meat is also guilty. They say one who eats meat inherits a half in demerit of the person who commits the killing of an animal. The killer kills animal because the eater eats meat. Sīha was lay devotee of Mahāvira before conversion to Buddhism.

On one occasion a physician, Jīvaka by name, approached the Buddha and reported the news he had heard.

Lord, it was said that animals were killed to offer meat to Samaṇa Gotama. Samaṇa Gotama accepted it knowing that the animal was killed specially for him! Then Jīvaka added: “Lord let me know whether they said are truly or not”

The Buddha denied the statement and explained: “O Jīvaka, I declare that any meat should not be eaten by

monks owing to three reasons: seen personally, heard and suspected that the preparation of meat is for him.” “ O Jīvaka, whoever attempts to slaughter an animal to offer meat for me and my disciples, he accumulated much evil through five reasons:

- (1) Having the purpose of offering alms-giving, one orders to bring an animal to be slaughtered/killed?
- (2) The animal suffers pain and grief while it is pulled by force; on account of that second reason much evil occurs within him.
- (3) The order to slaughter that animal; on account of that third reason much evil occurs within him.
- (4) The animal suffers pain and grief while it is killed; on account of that fourth reason much evil occurs within him.
- (5) He makes trouble for me and my disciples by offering an unsuitable food to us; on account of that fifth reason much evil occurs within him. (Jīvaka

**Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya)**

The Buddha allowed meat-eating if it is free from three reasons, because to eat meat is not an unwholesome deed, as is the killing of living beings. However, some alien religious thinkers (aññatitthiya) believed that one who eats meat comes into inheritance of demerit. The Buddha rejected their statement.

On one occasion Ven. Devadata, who opposed the Buddha, requested: “Lord, let monks not eat fish and meat throughout their lives; if one commits to eating it, he must be guilty”. The Buddha totally denied his request (Cūlavagga Pāḷi of Vinaya Piṭaka).

Regarding taking meat Āmagandha Sutta is very important. This Sutta is mentioned in Suttanta Nipāta of Khuddaka Nikāya. It was preached firstly by the Lord Buddha named Kassapa and retold by our Lord Buddha.

Once upon a time, a hermit who practised vegetarianism approached the Buddha. He inquired

whether the Buddha ate Āmagandha or not. The Buddha asked him: "What is the Āmagandha?" "The Āmagandha is meat", he replied.

"Āmagandha" literally means "odour of flesh". It has the connotation of putridity and repugnant sense of uncleaned. Therefore this hermit used the term "Āmagandha" for the word "meat".

Then the Buddha explained that the meat was not true Āmagandha but all mental defilements and all unwholesome deeds were really Āmagandha.

The Buddha says:

- (1) Taking life, beating, cutting, binding, stealing, lying, fraud deceiving, pretended knowledge, adultery-this is Āmagandha and not eating flesh.
- (2) When men are unrestrained in sensual pleasures, are greedy in tastes, are associated with impure actions, are of nihilistic view, crooked, obscurantist - this is Āmagandha and not eating



flesh.

- (3) When men are rough and harsh, backbiting, treacherous, without compassion, haughty, ungenerous and do not give anything to anyone: that is Āmagandha and not eating flesh.
- (4) Anger, pride, obstinacy, antagonism, hypocrisy, envy, ostentation, pride of opinion, intercourse with unrighteous - this is Āmagandha and not eating flesh.
- (5) When men are of bad morals, refuse to pay debts, slanderers, deceitful in their dealings, pretenders, when the vilest of men commit foul deeds-this is Āmagandha and not eating flesh.

According to Buddhism, purification of all mental defilements is very important to attain Nibbāna. One must attempt to purify one's mind. The purification of mind can be achieved only through cultivation of good within him. To achieve purification you must establish

Sīla, Samādhi and Paññā within you. Only through morality, concentration and wisdom you are able to achieve the purification of your mind. You can neither be defiled nor purified through eating meat or vegetables.

The Buddha did not exhort His followers to become vegetarians or non-vegetarians, but he admonished them to have moderation in food (bhojana mattaññutā). Whatever good you eat, vegetables or meat, you must control thirst for taste (rasataṇhā).

The thirst for taste can be eradicated through developing the perception on repulsiveness dealing with nutriment (āhāra paṭikūlasaññā) or through consideration of the necessity of food (paccavekkhaṇa). A monk should take food not for the purpose of joyful playing, not for taking pride in strength, not for the growth of the parts of the body to have charm, not for beautifying but for support and maintenance of the body, for keeping it unharmed, for enabling the practice of

moral life (Apaṇṇaka Sutta of Aṅguttara Nikāya)

In putta-maṁsūpama sutta of Saṁyutta nikāya, the Buddha compared kabālīkarā hāra to one own son's flesh. Here all ordinary material food, vegetable or meat, is known as kabālīkāra.

The Buddha says, “Suppose, a married couple who has only one baby boy went to a distant place, crossing the road of kantāra. On the way their provision unfortunately ran out. They could not continue their journey without food. They were about to starve to death when a wicked idea occupied their mind. They killed the beloved son, ate the flesh, and crossed over the journey with great sorrow for having killed the beloved son.

The Buddha explained the meaning through question and answer. “O monks, what is your opinion?” Do they eat flesh of the own son for the purpose of playing (davaya) or for taking pride in strength (madaya) or for the growth of parts of the body (maṇḍanāya) or

for beautifying (vibhūsanāya)? “No, O Lord. They will not eat it for the purpose of these.” Monks replied. “Do they eat only for the purpose of crossing over the journey?”

“Yes, O Lord”.

According to Puttamamsūpama Sutta, you must contemplate on your food as just they contemplate their own son’s flesh. By this way you are able to eradicate the thirst for the taste (rasataṇhā) of nutriment.

Let us consider the nutriment from the point of view of the Four Noble Truths. According to Buddhism, nutriment is a material thing and it pertains to the Aggregate of Matter (Rūpakkhandha). The Aggregate of Matter is a sort of suffering. Therefore the nutriment is subject to suffering (Dukkha). It is one that should be discerned correctly (pariññeyya). It is not a phenomenon that is to be eradicated (na pahātabba). The thirst for taste of nutriment (rasataṇhā) is the cause of suffering (dukkhasamudaya). It should be eradicated (pahātabba).

The cessation of the thirst for taste of nutriment is the cessation of suffering (Dukkhanirodha). It should be attained (Sacchikātabba). The contemplating nutriment correctly for the perception of repulsiveness in nutriment is the way leading to the cessation of suffering {Dukkha nirodha gaminī paṭipadā}. It is one that should be developed (Bhāvetabba).

According to Buddhism the cessation of suffering is of the most important. It can be attained only through the eradication of the Thirst (Taṇhā). Therefore you must attempt to uproot the Thirst for taste of Nutriment to attain the cessation of suffering. It is Nibbāna which is the goal of the Noble Practice. You may be a vegetarian or non-vegetarian, according to your wish. The only attempt you must make is to remove the Thirst for Taste of Nutriment, what you take every day.

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